



The Western Lonesome Society

Robert Garner McBrearty

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Delusions, ancestral obsessions, and a winsome collection of characters fuel this funny yet poignant meditation on the human condition.

Short-story virtuoso Robert Garner McBrearty succeeds in transitioning to novel-writing with *The Western Lonesome Society*. Using to great effect the conceit of stories within stories, the author leads with the plight of Jim, a troubled professor-cum-writer struggling to put some of his family history to paper—the kidnapping of his ancestors Tom and Will by Comanches angered by the light-skinned land stealers. As the brothers search for a way to adapt to their new life, Jim seeks to simultaneously maintain his hold on reality, impress his college community, gain the attention of his therapist, and win the affection of his agent. As the rollicking romp unravels, it becomes increasingly unclear which stories actually occurred and which are a byproduct of Jim’s melancholy and increasingly delusional mind. Ultimately, what is “real” in the context of the book matters little, because the writing on the page is simultaneously poignant and hilarious.

Secondary plot threads, such as the relationship between patient and therapist and a young man’s love affair with a topless dancer, also become more than the clichéd scenarios their source material might suggest. The therapist, instead of being either helpful or incompetent, is just downright lackadaisical and bored. The plot line with the exotic dancer takes an unexpected turn too, when one learns that she has no profession at all but is merely an escaped suicidal mental patient. Indeed, mental illness presents itself as a compelling recurring motif throughout the manuscript. Jim struggles to hold on to his faculties while Will and Tom desperately try to keep memories of their birth family alive: “You’re not our father. You’re making that up because you’re crazy.” Jim’s brother accuses their captor when Jim and his siblings are kidnapped at a young age. With Jim longing for old girlfriends and his mother exhorting him to “keep it cheerful,” McBrearty expertly explores the many nuances of feeling blue.

The third-person present tense gives immediacy to anyone seeking a thought-provoking meditation on the human condition.

JILL ALLEN (Fall 2015)

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